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The Phoenician Sailor

Amy Soileau

Margot didn't leave the city often, but every time she did she missed her evening outings. There was always a withdrawal from the thrill of clinking martini glasses, squared plates of delicately arranged canapés, and endless concords of musicians. At that moment, all she had was a half-finished crossword puzzle in her lap and Jacob, sitting next to her, thumbing through a stack of manila folders. Jacob was Margot's fiancé, a lover of the great outdoors, and a young, successful lawyer. Jacob insisted the couple hide away in his parents' mountain lodge for a week. He had stated many times before that, if it weren't for his job, he'd leave the city permanently. Agreeing to their week away was Margot's attempt at pacifying him.

"What're you looking at?" Margot asked.

"Work things," Jacob said.

The dullness and fatigue from the long trip left her brain fuzzy. There was a faint recollection of a party they were invited to earlier that afternoon. The thought of it left her blood rushing. It was just the excitement she needed, but the guilt of mentioning it to Jacob got the best of her. She didn't want to disturb him. It was something about the unusual calmness of his body and the glow of passion in his coal black eyes as he worked. Margot tried to distract herself with the puzzle, but the climbing restlessness didn't allow her eyes to focus on the text.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said, suddenly. The flop of the folders onto the mahogany coffee table caught Margot's attention.

"For what?"

"It's our first night here, and I've been neglecting you."

"It's fine, really," Margot said.

"What if I pour you some wine and run a nice bath? I can rummage through one of these closets and find a board game to play. Or maybe we can watch an old western flick on TV."

Margot jumped at the opportunity. "What about that party?"

"What party, dear?"

"The girl who came by earlier asking to borrow matches and ice, she invited us to her party tonight."

Margot scanned Jacob's face and waited for a reaction. It was difficult to read because his sharp features softened in the dying light of the fire.

"Oh, that's right. Are you sure you want to go? I didn't think it was a formal invitation...just good manners."

"I don't think she'd mind if we went," Margot said.

“What about spending time together?” Jacob asked. He placed his firm hands on her narrow shoulders and began to massage them. His seersucker button-down shirt scraped against the suede couch.

“Well, we could spend time together at the party,” Margot said.

Jacob’s mouth slid into a frown. “I’m not feeling up to it, but you can go if you want.”

“I think I will,” Margot said, squirming from Jacob’s grasp. She glanced at the clock on the wall and figured arriving at nearly ten wasn’t too late.

“Are you sure? You don’t really know her.”

“I meet people all the time I don’t know. Plus it’d be rude if I don’t go...good manners and all.”

“That’s one of the things I cherish most about you,” Jacob said. He grasped Margot’s kinked blonde curls and kissed her forehead. “You’re spontaneous, hopping from one thing to another, like a little grasshopper.”

“That’s a terrible metaphor.”

“It’s a simile, dear.”

“Whichever, it’s still terrible.” Margot got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. She pulled out a bottle of wine from the liquor cabinet. “Are you positive you don’t mind me going?”

“Well, only if you promise to go hiking with me tomorrow morning.”

Margot placed one hand on her hip and let out a sigh. “Seems like a fair trade.”

She grabbed the keys from the granite countertop and slipped into her ruffled pea coat.

“Don’t stay out too late. You’ll need all the rest you can get to keep up with me tomorrow.”

“We’ll see.” Margot blew Jacob a kiss and closed the front door.

Once outside, the frosty November air filled Margot’s lungs and burned her sinuses. There was a whiff of cedar or pine, but she wasn’t sure which one. A tinge of guilt hung over Margot, but she reminded herself Jacob would be fine. One of the best aspects of their relationship was that he never scrutinized her decisions. She looked up over the tips of soaring trees at the night sky. It was a deep navy, with clear pinpricks of tiny stars. She was relieved it didn’t look like snow.

Margot stopped at the first cabin that appeared on the winding road. This cabin was smaller and more rustic than hers and Jacob’s. Instead of paneled wood, the exterior was made from rough stones with a tin roof jutting out from the porch. There wasn’t a single light on, and there were only a couple vehicles parked in the gravel driveway. Margot decided to peek her head out of the driver’s side window. The soft beat of what seemed like drums played in the distance. The skin of her bottom lip became raw before she decided to park the rental. She followed the sounds around to the back of the cabin. There was a bonfire in the middle of the small back lawn, a few silhouetted people sitting around it on blankets, and a fold-out table set to the side.

“Over here!” A voice yelled.

Margot ignored her pesky nerves and tried to walk up with all the confidence she could muster. The girl Margot recognized from earlier stood up and hugged her. She

wasn't sure if it was the hug or the smell of body odor and charred wood that stunned her more.

"Glad you could come. Is it just you?"

"It's just me. My fiancé, Jacob, was too tired."

"This is really rude of me, but I don't remember your name."

"It's Margot, and don't feel guilty. I'm also terrible with names."

"Ah, I knew it was something unique. I'm Kathy, but please call me Luna."

"Yeah, my name's been passed down to the women in my family for three generations," Margot said.

"That's cool, and this is perfect timing. We were running a little low on sangria."

Luna uncorked and emptied out an eighty dollar bottle of Merlot into a large plastic punch bowl. She then proceeded to introduce everyone there. There was Luna's sister Sarah, the drummer Ethan, Jackie, and Caroline. Margot felt odd because everyone was dressed so differently from her. Their clothes were shabby and looked as if they were made from the same material as potato sacks. Their hair ranged anywhere from dreaded to shaved completely on the sides. She recalled Luna visiting earlier in a knitted hat and pajamas, but at the time chalked it up to leisure vacation attire.

"So, where are you from?" Sarah asked, refilling her cup.

"New York City," Margot said.

"That's pretty exciting. We're all from a small town in Rhode Island," Sarah said.

"And what do you do for a living?" Luna asked, handing Margot a cup of sangria.

Margot fumed at the question. She never understood why it was considered suitable for casual conversation. She wasn't interested in other people's career choices. On a regular night out it would rarely come up, but when it did there would usually be accessible distractions for her to cling to. Like the distant familiar face, or the teeth rattling vibrations from a live band. She was completely out of her element, left with only the silence of anticipation and the heat of the fire licking her cheeks.

"I'm kind of in-between things at the moment. And you?" Margot asked.

"Sarah and I own a business back home," Luna said. "It's a type of holistic healing center...yoga, herbal teas, crystals, and so on. Actually, Caroline is the best damn acupuncture practitioner you ever did see."

Luna went on to explain how Jackie was the head yogi, Sarah the number cruncher, Ethan, the masseur, and she was just the little twine that kept the business afloat. Apparently, Luna would save all year to treat her veteran employees to a getaway in the mountains. Time crept by slowly, and Margot remained quiet for most of their work conversations. Occasionally, she would nod at the end of a sentence or force a laugh while hiding her mouth in the cup's opening. The taste of the sangria wasn't pleasant. A wine of that caliber should never be diluted with fruit juice.

"I know what this sangria is missing," Luna said. "More fruit! Sarah, why don't you come inside with me and help cut up some more apples."

Luna and Sarah disappeared into the cabin. Caroline and Jackie followed behind to grab a few extra blankets since the temperature continued to drop. Ethan busily examined the bongo drums between his legs. Margot had no choice but to focus on the

crackling of the firewood beneath the heat. The bursting reds and yellows put her into a trance-like state. She reflected on how everyone at the party seemed so comfortable in life. The flickers of light in their eyes as they spoke about their jobs left Margot unsettled. It was similar to Jacob's, but he was supposed to be a special case. It didn't add up how people in their mid-twenties, especially not born into money, could find their footing so early in life. Margot had once searched for that type of feeling. She attended two semesters of college, but after changing her major three times she just gave up. Margot worked as a professional party hostess, but even that didn't work out. Nothing she pursued came even close to giving her the spark she needed.

That's why Margot chose to surround herself with certain people in the city, people who didn't have that light in their eyes, at least not from what she could tell. She hungered for them at that moment, the familiar backdrop of music, the persistent shallow chatter, and the sea of vacant eyes. The pit of Margot's stomach coiled into knots, and shivers prickled all over her skin. The warmth from the fire weakened, and the cold hitting her back became much more noticeable.

"I heard you playing drums when I first got here. Have you always played music?" Margot asked.

Ethan set his drums down but avoided making eye contact. "I've been playing for a long time. I used to be in the marching band back in high school. I played the snare mostly but ended up hating the harsh sounds. I quit for a long time until a friend gave me a set of bongos. Do you play?"

"No. I just enjoy listening." At this point, Margot was just killing time. As soon as Luna would return she'd call it a night. A few moments later the women returned, and a sigh of relief escaped Margot's lips.

"Margot, I have a treat for you," Luna said. She held what looked like a pack of playing cards in her hand. "This is something we do every year and since you're new, you get to go first."

"What is it?" Margot asked. Her eyes darted from the cards to Luna's to back at the cards.

"It's one of her famous tarot readings. She makes the cards herself and everything," Sarah said, dropping freshly sliced apples into the punch bowl.

Margot became amused at the idea and figured a tarot reading would be a fun party game. She primped her hair and decided to play along before leaving. Without being asked, Ethan got up to poke the fire and add a bundle of fresh wood.

"Would you mind playing your drums while we do this?" Margot asked.

Ethan obliged and began using his palms to hit the drums in variable patterns. Luna smoothed the blankets and then closed her eyes while shuffling the deck.

"Do you have anything you want to ask specifically?" Luna said.

"No...not that I can think of," Margot replied.

"It's okay you don't have to. It'll just be a general reading," Luna said. She cut the deck into four small piles. "Alright, now I need you to use your non-dominant hand and grab from the first pile, then the second, and the third and so on. I'll point to where you need to place them."

Margot's eyes filled with the images of the cards she turned over and set down. The portraits were drawn intricately with ink. The first one was of a man dressed in medieval clothes, tights and fluffed sleeves while standing on the brink of a cliff.

"This first card," Luna said, "is what's at hand, maybe a problem or just something concerning your life at the present moment."

"Who's in the picture?" Margot asked.

"It's the fool," Luna said.

"Oh great," Margot said.

"It isn't a bad thing. The fool represents a new beginning and new choices to be discovered."

"What about the others?" Margot asked.

Luna gestured to the second card. It had a picture of a naked woman standing next to a calm pool of water under a starry night sky. She explained how it was called "The Star" and is typically a good card to pull. The placement of this card meant what's influencing the situation, and The Star always appeared when a situation was in darkness to act as light. The third card was a man sitting and hammering eight circled stars. This was called "The Eight of Pentacles" and meant hard work was at hand. Luna paused at the fourth card.

"This is interesting," Luna said, with a smile spreading across her face. "This one hasn't been pulled for a long time."

The card was vague and not as well-drawn as the rest. Margot could make out a large ship fighting against a rainstorm.

"This is the Phoenician Sailor," Luna said. "It's a tricky card. The placement of it is meant to give advice on what to do about a given situation."

"And what advice does it give?" Margot asked.

"Well that's the tricky part," Luna said. "It's up to the card drawer. It either means utter desolation or complete rebirth."

"Oh," Margot said. She forced a half-smile at Luna. "Thank you."

Luna took a quick break to refill her drink. Sarah, Jackie, and Caroline chatted amongst themselves while Ethan continued to beat away on his drums. Margot was too distracted by her own thoughts to pay attention. The tarot reading left her with the same discomfort as watching the fire. That's when she decided it was time to leave. Her feet were itching to run as she stood up and said a quick goodbye to everyone. Halfway back around the cabin Margot heard Luna calling after her.

"Here, I want you to have this," Luna said, handing Margot a card. "Think of it as a good luck charm. If you're ever in the area, don't hesitate to look us up."

"Oh no, I really couldn't," Margot said.

"I've been meaning to draw up a new one for ages now anyway." Luna hugged her and slipped the card into Margot's jacket pocket.

The drive back to the cabin was a blur. She turned the car's engine off and stared at the light coming from the living room window. She wondered if Jacob was still awake or had fallen asleep amongst piles of legal papers. She wanted to run inside and shut everything else out but felt cemented to the leather seats. The stench of soot permeated from her hair and clothes, filling the small space in which she sat. Her surroundings were still and silent, but something thrashed about inside her mind. Half of Margot blamed the

sangria for making her emotional about something as silly as a tarot reading, as if it were some grand puzzle to solve about her life, and Margot wasn't very good at puzzles. The other side, which she tried her best to disregard most of the time, begged for something else. Margot slipped her hand into her jacket's pocket and pulled out the card. Without bothering to look earlier, now she could see it was the Phoenician Sailor card Luna had given her. It was the same obscure ship swaying in the stormy waves. Something about it felt all too familiar. Tears stung and forced their way out of Margot's eyes. A deep feeling of sadness washed through each one of her veins. It wasn't the type of sadness that appears for a moment, or even a night. It was an unattended sadness that tries to emerge but is only buried even deeper. Each rolling tear left her with an odd sensation of half-emptiness and half-relief. There was now a name for the haunting feeling. With the name came a small level of understanding. She pressed the card hard against her chest and wiped away the stickiness from her cheeks. She wasn't sure where to go from that moment, but she knew how she felt. That was enough for now.